

A STYLE THAT CREATES MEANING, conclusion to "The Great Diptych: Geology and Relief" in Orson Welles: A Critical View by André Bazin, tr. Jonathan Rosenbaum (NY: Harper & Row, 1978), pp.81-82

All great cinematic works doubtless reflect, more or less explicitly, the moral vision, the spiritual tendencies of their author.

If this is so, what would be the aim of film study? to discover this moral vision? how much of that could be determined by examining the life of the author? how much by examining the entire body of a director's films?

Doesn't this statement presuppose that the concept of authorship is not problematic?

What is being said or assumed here about "greatness" and "moral vision"?

What does Bazin mean by those terms? What is he saying is the relation between them?

What is a "moral vision," and how would one evaluate it?

Does Dreyer have more "spiritual tendencies" than Deren?

Is it true that an author's spiritual tendencies are reflected in a work? How does it happen? Is it a direct reflection or a distorted one? How could one compare a cynical moral vision (say Sternberg) with a sincere one (say Ford)? Would we want to establish a hierarchy of great authors on the basis of their moral vision? What would be the aim of such an effort? What would be the means? What would be the use?

Is Renoir more "spiritual" than Eisenstein? Does Bergman have more moral vision than Woody Allen? How could we discuss the moral vision of Kubelka? De Mille?

If you accepted this statement, how would you deal with Altman? How would you define his moral vision? Why is it that critics seem to split sharply on Altman's worth? Is Ken Russell a similar case?

Sartre wrote in reference to Faulkner and Dos Passos that every novelistic technique necessarily relates back to a metaphysics. If there was a metaphysics, the old form of découpage couldn't contribute to its expression: the world of Ford and Capra can be defined on the basis of their scripts, their themes, the dramatic effects they have sought, the choice of scenes. It is not to be found in the découpage as such. With Orson Welles, on the contrary, the découpage in depth becomes technique which constitutes the meaning of the story.

Découpage The design of the film, the arrangement of its shots. "Decoupage classique" is the French term for the old Hollywood style of seamless narration.--James Monaco, How to Read a Film (NY: Oxford U Press, 1977), p. 404.

Découpage does not mean cutting or editing, though it can bear on this process; it normally means the definitive form or structure of the film as described on paper, as it is to appear later on screen.--Hugh Gray, tr. note to Bazin, What is Cinema? vol. 2 (Berkeley, U of Ca. Press, 1971), p. 181.

Formally, a film consists of a succession of fragments excerpted from a spatial and temporal continuum. Découpage in its third French meaning refers to what results when the spatial fragments, or, more accurately, the succession of

spatial fragments excerpted in the shooting process, converge with the temporal fragments whose duration may be roughly determined during the shooting, but whose final duration is established only on the editing table. The dialectical notion inherent in the term découpage enables us to determine, and therefore to analyze, the specific form of a film, its essential unfolding in time and space. Découpage as a structural concept involving a synthesis is strictly a French notion. An American film-maker (or film critic, in so far as American film critics are interested in film technique at all) conceives of a film as involving two successive and separate operations, the selection of a camera setup and then the cutting of the filmed images. It may never occur to English-speaking film-makers or English-speaking critics that these two operations stem from a single underlying concept, simply because they have at their disposal no single word for this concept.--Noel Burch, Theory of Film Practice (1969), tr. Helen R. Lane (NY: Praeger, 1973) p. 4.

It isn't merely a way of placing the camera, sets and actors (mettre en scène); it places the very nature of the story in question. With this technique, the cinema strays a little further from the theatre, becomes less a spectacle than a narrative.

What does it mean for a technique to "constitute the meaning of the story"?

What does it mean to "place the very nature of the story in question"?

Why should film become more of a narrative than spectacle?

Is this inherent in the "nature" of cinema?

How would Bazin then respond to Brakhage's MOTHLIGHT, a film of pure "spectacle", apparently.

Indeed, as in the novel, it isn't only the dialogue, the descriptive clarity, the behavior of the characters, but the style imparted to the language which creates meaning.

How is style defined if it creates meaning?

The objective nature of the modern novel, by reducing the strictly grammatical aspect of its stylistics to a minimum, has laid bare the secret essence of style. Certain qualities of the language of Faulkner, Hemingway, or Malraux would certainly not come through in translation, but the essential quality of their styles would not suffer because their style is almost completely identical with their narrative technique--the ordering in time of fragments of reality. The style becomes the inner dynamic principle of the narrative....--Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality", What is Cinema?, vol. 2, p. 31.

Does the denotation and connotation of "secret essence of style" as a critical phrase clarify or obscure? Is it true that the "essential quality" of Faulkner's style, or Hemingway's style, rests in their "ordering in time of fragments of reality"? Or is this a statement that could only be made by someone unfamiliar with the particular stylistic inflections of those two writers on the level of the sentence? How many American students of

Faulkner and Hemingway would agree with this discussion of the "essence" of their style?

What are the theoretical implications of style creating meaning? What then do we say of content?

Might it be possible for content to be doing one thing and style doing something different? of "going against the grain" of the manifest content? Can we also read a latent content? Or is such a latent content just a variation on the meaning created by style?

Far from being--as some persist in saying, assuming inattentiveness in the spectator--a return to the "static shot" employed in the early days of cinema by Melies, Zecca and Feuillade, or else some rediscovery of filmed theatre, Welles' sequence shot is a decisive stage in the evolution of film language, which after having passed through the montage of the silent period and the decoupage of the talkies, is now tending to revert to the static shot, but by a dialectical progress which incorporates all the discoveries of *découpage* into the realism of the sequence shot. Of course Welles is not the only promoter of this evolution, to which Wyler's work also gives testimony. Ren  ir, for example, in all his French productions, did not cease to work in the same direction. But Welles has brought to it a powerful and original contribution which, like it or not, has shaken the edifices of cinematic tradition.

SEQUENCE SHOT A long, usually complex shot, often including complicated camera movements and action. Also called Plan-s  quence.--Mon  co, p. 428.

Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality--its continuity. Classical editing, deriving from Griffith, separated reality into successive shots which were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event....Orson Welles started a revolution by systematically employing a depth of focus that had so far not been used. Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an a priori significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern...the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene. ...Thanks to the depth of focus of the lens, Orson Welles restored to reality its visible continuity.
--Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality", vol. 2, p. 28.

Is it the case that a film can "force" the mind of the spectator to discern? What are the implications of such a theoretical position? How would we know if this kind of "forcing" a way of seeing was being used for good or bad ends, morally and politically? Doesn't Eisenstein's type of montage frequently come in for criticism for "forcing" reactions? Why is this kind of "forcing" ok? Or is it?

One may imagine that the intuition of the sequence shot, this new unit in film semantics and syntax, grew out of the vision of a director accustomed to placing the actor within the decor, who experienced traditional editing no longer

as a fluency or language but as a loss of efficacy, a mutilation of the spectacular possibilities of the image. For Welles, each scene to be played forms a complete unit in time and space.--Bazin, "The Great Diptych", p. 68.

In other words, the book [Dudley Andrew, André Bazin] is styled as a defense, but a defense against an enemy never called by its proper name. Yet absent though it may be from the book, the enemy is known nevertheless to be the variety of theoretical activity critical of Bazin, represented in this country by figures as otherwise diverse as Annette Michelson, Brian Henderson, and James Roy MacBean, and in France by such similarly disparate factions as those represented by Gerard Gozlan and the Cinéthique group, to mention only the more well-known. Among what their activities hold in common in their reading of Bazin is a rejection of his view that there is a transcendental truth to be found in reality, and expressible as such thanks to the recording/presentational properties of photography, which then comes to be seen as a instrument waiting to be deployed in a metaphysically-based campaign to "reveal" the essence--an essence spiritually instructive and therapeutic--of visible reality. Bazin's attachment to such a conception of reality (and his attendant valorization of the sequence-shot opposed to the undemocratic tyranny of Soviet montage), offering up its "reflection" to any artist's camera stopping long enough to fix a gaze upon it, is identified in turn as the cinema's true vocation, rather than as a particularly determined defense of a conventionalized realist depiction (a defense happily coincident with the flourishing of Italian neo-realism, whose generous defender Bazin became). But his real interests seem to side always with the modes of transcendence now available to us via cinematographic representation, and clearly his fascination with that tends ultimately to deny to the cinema any kind of sufficiency unto itself, so dependent is it on the eternal presence of the real whose truths it is fated to present, or, rather, to present once again to those who have yet to learn them.--Bill Horrigan, "André Bazin's Destiny", Jump Cut 19, p. 34.

Why does Bazin ignore Welles' sound editing? Given Welles' work in radio before making KANE, what might we look for in terms of sound in KANE and AMBERSONS?

Bazin preferred deep focus photography and the long take to montage because they preserved the natural continuity of reality rather than cutting it up and analyzing it. This was important to Bazin because...he believed in an ordered but unknowable universe into which one peered long and hard in order to discover its essence--a God of love. Thus any a priori analysis of reality by the filmmaker tended to reduce this possibility of insight by introducing abstractions.--John Hess, "La Politique des auteurs; part one: World View as Aesthetic", Jump Cut 1, p. 20, (1974).

One could even almost say that THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI is paradoxically the richest in meaning of Welles' films in proportion to the insignificance of the script: the plot no

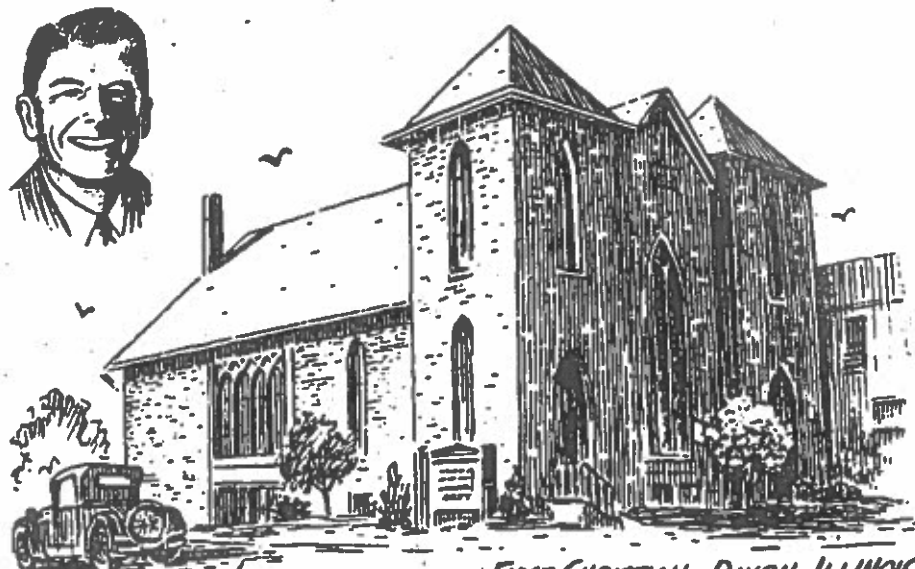
longer interferes with the underlying action, from which the themes blossom out in something close to their pure states. Fundamentally moral themes, which reveal the essential obsessions of Wellesian ethics, and above all, an eminently contemporary awareness of the freedom of choice between good or evil, together with the feeling that this freedom of choice doesn't depend exclusively on the will of man, but is inscribed within a modern form of destiny.--Bazin, Welles, p.94.

La politique des auteurs was, in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war.--Hess, p.19.

...Any great painting is first of all a creation of the spirit which is sustained by the spirit. It has an existence beyond its material elements, which are only mediators.--Bazin, Jean Renoir, p. 130.

For some years, the misogyny of the American cinema has become a commonplace of intellectual criticism. Rita Hayworth (in LADY FROM SHANGHAI) was undoubtedly one of its first victims, and remains, through Welles' genius, its most glorious martyr.--Bazin, Welles, p. 94.

What of the misogyny of French criticism?
Is "genius" the right word to apply to a misogynistic filmmaker?
Is "genius" somehow separable from manifest content?
If all great cinematic works doubtlessly reflect the moral vision, the spiritual tendencies of their author, can a misogynist moral vision produce a great cinematic work?



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Bazin prefers such depth of field shooting to montage constructions for three reasons: it is inherently more realistic; certain events demand this more realistic treatment; and it confronts our normal psychological way of processing events, thereby shocking us with a reality we often fail to recognize.

Andrew, Major Film Theories p. 157

(speeds)

(athletes/spectators) The implication of shared spectacle is therefore subverted as one is made made conscious of this disjunction.

4. The subversion and restoration of filmic illusion acting to distend and contract the filmic image. (cyclist/theatre)
5. The subversion of the cinematic illusion, through processes of distortion and/or abstraction. (split screen trans/visual gags--exercising with dumbbells/stopping temporal flow by superimpositions)
6. The process of intellection so constantly solicited by the complex structure, the entire texture of this most assertively edited film.

--Annette Michelson, "From Magician to Epistemologist" in P. Adams Sitney, The Essential Cinema vol. 1 (NY: Anthology Film Archives and NYU, 1975) pp 103, 108, 109. orig. Artforum 10:7 (Mar 72) 60-72.

I've managed to make THREE SONGS ABOUT LENIN (at least to some degree) accessible and comprehensible to millions. But not at the price of cinematographic language; and not by abandoning the principles which had been formulated earlier. No one would demand this of us.

The important thing is not separate form from content. The secret lies in unity of form and content. In refraining from shocking the spectator by introducing objects or devices which are unnatural or extraneous to the work.

...

Practice has shown that my assumptions were not wrong or useless. And practice is the criterion of truth.

Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks-Revolution," (selections) Film Culture no 25 (summer 62) 45-61. rptd in Geduld, Filmmakers on filmmaking and Sitney, Film Culture Reader.

Critics of rather better than average standing have said in recent years that after socialism has been achieved it's likely there will be no further use for poetry, that it will disappear. This comes from nothing else than a faulty definition of poetry--and the arts generally. I don't hear anyone say that mathematics is likely to be outmoded, to disappear shortly.

--William Carlos Williams, "Author's Introduction (1944)" to "The Wedge" in The Collected Later Poems (Norfolk CT: New Directions, 1950) p. 3.

The reason why Taoism and Zen present, at first sight, such a puzzle to the Western mind is that we have taken a restricted view of human knowledge. For us, almost all knowledge is what a Taoist would call conventional knowledge, because we do not feel that we really know anything unless we can represent it to ourselves in words, or in some other system of conventional signs such as the notations of mathematics or music. Such knowledge is called conventional because it is a matter of social agreement as to the codes of communication.

Alan Watts, The Way of Zen (NY: Vintage, 1957) p. 4